DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 316 UD 019 111

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TITLE A Child's Place: Toward a More Complex View.
INSTITUTION Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y. Inst. for Urban and Minority Education.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 9p.; For a related document, see UD 019 112
AVAILABLE FROM Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York 10027 ($1.00)
JOURNAL CIT IRCD Bulletin; v13 n4 Fall 1978

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bias; *Children; Classroom Observation Techniques; *Classroom Research; Educational Research; *Elementary School Students; Minority Group Children; *Research Problems; School Role; *Social Factors; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

The educational research on schools and classrooms is burdened by the unresolved images of children and their place in society. Most educational research exaggerates the dominance of the teacher and neglects the presence and power of children. This tends to support the irresponsible, dependent, and powerless role assigned to children in our culture. Cultural perspectives on childhood are reinforced by sociological conceptions of the purposes and functions of schools in contemporary society. These views offer a partial and unrealistic picture of classroom life. Neglected are the dynamic and uneven process of socialization and the initiating of creative actions of children in classrooms. There are also methodological and strategic reasons why the interactions and social systems among children in classrooms have been given such minimal attention by researchers. In addition, stereotyped perceptions distort such research and cultural differences account for research misinterpretation, particularly in the case of minority, lower class children. In the process of developing methodological strategies for documenting and analyzing the patterns and interactions and social systems created and sustained by children, researchers must confront current cultural biases, traditional theories and beliefs regarding children and childhood, and views held on the social and economic purposes of schools. (Author/EB)

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ED166316

IRCD Bulletin

A Publication of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

Volume XIII, Number 4 Fall 1978

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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A Child's Place: Toward A More Complex View

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot

Contemporary American society offers conflicting views of the nature, development, and status of children. Our cultural dogma gives mixed messages to parents and teachers about "the child's place," a confusion that must be experienced and interpreted by children who are being socialized by their ambivalent sponsors. The cultural rhetoric, for instance, claims children as our most precious resource and yet we offer them almost no opportunity to participate meaningfully in the work of society until they reach adulthood. Additionally, our view of children in families and schools tends to negate their presence and perspective. On the one hand, children seem to be at the center of our psychological concerns while on the other hand they are regarded as irrelevant, and even distracting, to the economic and social arrangements of society.

The educational research on schools and classrooms often seems to be burdened by the unresolved images of children and their place in society. Schools, which are primarily populated by children, would seem to be perfect settings for researchers who wish to record children's behavior, development, interactions, and perspectives on the world. Those researchers, interested in documenting life in classrooms, should want to learn at least as much about the culture of children as about the nature and scope of the adult presence in schools. Instead, the predominant picture of classrooms found in educational research presents teachers as larger than life and children as shadowy, unknown figures.

In this paper I will argue the need for researchers to systematically document the evolving and dynamic interactions of children (often out of the range of the teacher's vision) if they are to offer a more authentic and realistic vision of classroom life. As long as researchers focus on the behaviors and communications of teachers as a reflection of the quality of school experience for *children,* they will be presenting a distorted and narrow picture of classrooms. We will begin to gain a sense of the range and variability of perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of children in school if we record not only teacher-initiated interactions or teacher responsiveness to children, but also the actions and interactions of children—those that are directed by the teacher, those that are in opposition to teacher directives, those that are child created, initiated, and sustained, and those that evolve out of social interactions among peers.

The Child's Place

Although increasing numbers of researchers have begun to record the multifaceted dimensions of classroom life, the primary preoccupation of most observers continues to be the dominance and centrality of the teacher. Children's voices, actions, and perspectives are largely neglected. Throughout the research, we hear about children through *class mean* scores on achievement tests. Not only is our vision of children usually limited to results on narrowly constructed standardized tests, but we are rarely given any information on the *individual* child.

The mean scores within a class mask individual differences. Research findings on ability grouping, for example, show that it is virtually impossible to create homogeneous groups of children. If children are selected to be homogeneous on a single variable such as achievement, reading scores, or IQ, they are found to vary widely on other social, psychological, and intellectual dimensions. Even if one focuses solely on the variable on which the children were homogeneously selected, their differential rates of growth and development create variation on this dimension after a few months of school (Olson 1966). It is a distortion of reality, therefore, to represent children's learning in terms of *class means* on standardized tests. Children possess different constellations of abilities that cannot be captured by an aggregate score. Neither can patterns of learning be captured by summary, end-of-year scores on standardized tests

Not only does most of the research on classrooms

A longer version of this article, entitled "A Question of Perspective: Toward a More Complex View of Classrooms," is published as Number 58 in the ERIC/CUE *Urban Diversity Series.* In this longer version a more detailed review of the research is given.

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neglect individual differences among children in ability and learning styles, it also fails to record the children's responses to the classroom environment. Student gain scores tell us nothing about the children's perceptions of the learning experience, their views of the teacher, or their accommodation to the social context. We do not know *how* children perceive the environment, nor do we get any sense of *what* they perceive as salient and important. Intuitively, we all recognize that our retrospective view of our early school experience evokes particular events. Those special moments capture our memories—not necessarily the repetitive patterns of interaction that we experienced daily. The frequencies of certain kinds of interactions may not determine their relative importance to the experience of the child.

In probing the complexities of teacher-child interactions, it is also crucial to recognize that all children in a classroom do not share in a common experience. In an interesting observational study, Philip Jackson and Henriette Lahaderne (1970) warn observers about the dangers of perceiving the classroom experience as one that is shared by all children equally. The authors recorded the differential interactions of teachers in four sixth-grade classrooms:

> . . . The findings reveal a range of differences in each classroom broad enough to weaken any hopes of making facile generalizations about what goes on there. In each classroom there are a few students who are almost always out of the teacher's range of vision, so to speak, and a few others who are almost always underfoot. What this difference means and how it comes about is anybody's guess, but it is fair to conclude that by the end of the year some students likely will be more familiar to the teacher than will others, even though they have all lived together in the same room for about the same number of days. This observation calls into question the conventional view of looking upon each classroom as a unit whose participants have shared in a common educational experience. In a sense, each classroom contains as many environments as it does pairs of eyes through which to view them. [p. 103]

Jackson and Lahaderne discuss the notion of the "social density of the *child's* psychological world" (p. 102), and the relative power and importance of the teacher in that world. This discussion leads one to ask again about the place of the child in the classroom research. The saliency of the teacher in the child's world is not only related to how much contact the teacher initiates, but also related to how the child shapes his world, whom he chooses to communicate with, and whom he chooses to exclude. Why do we hear so much about the dominant role of teachers and so little about the part children take in shaping patterns of interaction and classroom social systems? Why have children's voices, so loud and omnipresent in real classrooms, been silenced in the research literature? What are some of the conceptual, methodological, and cultural barriers that have obscured and limited a complex view of classroom life?

Cultural Preoccupations

Although our cultural dogma proclaims children as our most valued resource, we do not take them seriously as whole persons with feelings, needs, fears, dreams, and perspectives on the world. They do not play a central, functional role in the work of this society and are viewed as dependent, costly, and demanding consumers. One of the ways that adults have responded to the increased dependency of children is to view them as love-objects to be cuddled, protected, kissed, and squeezed. Psychiatrist Chester Pierce (1975) has called this prejudicial, dehumanizing behavior on the part of adults "childism." And John Holt, in *Escape from Childhood* (1974) claims that children learn to respond as love objects to repress their own dignity and autonomy. "Love object" corresponds with the better-known term "sex object." People use children as love objects when they "think they have the right, or even duty, to bestow on them 'love,' visible and tangible signs of affection whenever [they] want, however [they] want and whether [the children] like it or not" (p. 105).

Related to the above, research by cultural anthropologists and developmental psychologists claims that contemporary American society exaggerates the discontinuities between adult and child. There are great disparities between the responsible roles assumed by adults and the nonresponsible roles assigned to children; between the dominance of adults and the submission of children. Adults are viewed as *having to work* while children are perceived as *wanting to play*. Cross-cultural comparisons reveal nonindustrialized societies where children take an active and critical role in the work production, where there is a continuous, sustaining relationship between adult and child, where relationships and interactions are not perceived in terms of asymmetric power, and where children are ritualistically graduated into responsible and mature participation in the social structure.

Because children do not generally participate in the real work of society, parents and teachers create contrived tasks that are designed to be developmentally meaningful (in the sense that they are devised to lead to the incremental and sequential learning of age-appropriate cognitive and social skills), but are clearly not central to the production and continuity of community life. Children rarely have the opportunity to see a direct relationship between what they do and their own survival, or between what they do and what their parents do. Because children's tasks are of a dif-

IRCD Bulletin

Published quarterly by the Institute for Urban and Minority Education. Subscription rate: $4.00 per year. Back Issues: 1-9 copies, $1.00 each; 10-24 copies, $0.80 each; 25-49 copies, $0.60 each; 50 copies and over, $0.50 each.

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ferent quality and character than adult work, praise for work well done by children is often based on arbitrary standards and has ambiguous meaning.

As children move abruptly from child to adult status, from nonresponsible roles to responsible roles, they are expected to adopt physical skills, intellectual competencies, psychological capacities, and social modes that are opposite from, and often contrary to, those that were learned and reinforced during childhood. Maturation is made more difficult, awkward, and nebulous because the cultural frameworks from which one acts and takes cues shift dramatically. As a child moves into the gray and murky state of adolescence, there are few rituals or habits that seem familiar and intuitive. More often, there are shocking behavioral and attitudinal contradictions that need to be confronted and internalized.

In *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson (1950) argues that contrasts and discontinuities between the expectations and responsibilities of children and adults in this society make it difficult for young people to establish an identity, to individuate, and to take *themselves* seriously. Work is seen as central to identity formation, a part of the process of moving beyond childlike dependency to responsible adulthood. A sense of industry, as Erikson calls it, is a major formative force in sustaining continuity between childhood and adulthood. Depriving children of opportunities to do "real" work is not only distorting to adult perceptions of their capabilities and value, but also is likely to inhibit their developmental progress and psychological maturation.

The demand characteristics of children's work also seem to affect the quality of their social and interpersonal relationships, the development of personality and style, and their sense of responsibility to other members of the community. In *Children of Six Cultures*, Beatrice and John Whiting (1975) report variations in the characteristics and behavior of children raised in societies where adults demand different kinds of work from them. In the three complex societies studied by the Whitings (the Khalapur in India, the Tairan in Japan, and Orchard Town in the United States), to varying degrees, children were given few chores, the tasks were unrelated to adult work, and schooling was compulsory. In Orchard Town, for instance, children were expected to do one chore at home besides their school work, usually cleaning their room or helping with the evening meal. Tairan children were required to do slightly more, either house cleaning, child care, dishwashing, animal care, or helping to carry water or wood. The minimal work responsibilities of children in these cultures supported social behaviors described by the Whitings as dominant-dependent. That is, children aggressively sought to direct and control others (dominant) at the same time as they worked hard to gain their attention and help (dependent). In contrast, in the three nontechnological, simple cultures (The Tarong in the Philippines, the Juxttahuaca in Mexico, and the Nyansongo in Kenya), the chores assigned to children were many and critical to the survival of family and community. In Kenya, children were given the heaviest work load (with little schooling if any) including herding animals, gardening, grinding grain, collecting water and wood, and child care. These chores were greatly demanding of the children's time, endurance, and energy. Herding cattle could be an all day job, and child care entailed continuous hours of watching and nurturing infants. Schooling did not compete with the work of families and communities in terms of its perceived importance or productive value. In these cultures, children developed social behaviors high in nurturance and responsibility (pp. 71, 82). They were quick to offer help and support (nurturance) and would often structure and organize collective work (responsibility).

In contemporary, highly technological societies, therefore, schools not only serve a caretaking and teaching function but they also segregate children from community work and adult life, and reinforce and institutionalize the discontinuities between childhood and adulthood. Anthropological observations indicate that the sharp contrasts of status and responsibility lead to difficulties in maturation and identity formation, support highly egotistic and competitive social behavior, and devalue the qualities of nurturance and responsibility among children. These "cultural accretions,"[1] unique to our society, have a great impact on the social and psychological growth of children, but they also shape adult perspectives on childhood and their interactions with children. If children are perceived as dependent and costly consumers rather than productive participants in the work of society; if schools are designed to ensure their separation from "real life"; and if their presence becomes meaningful only with chronological maturity, then it is unlikely that children's voices will be heard or taken seriously. The silence and invisibility of children in most of the research on classroom life is part of a more general cultural predisposition to negate their importance and contribution to social and economic life. Exaggerating the dominance of the teacher and neglecting the presence and power of children in classroom research would seem to support the irresponsible, dependent, and powerless roles assigned to children in our culture. Somehow their behaviors, feelings, and needs are not even worthy of careful attention, description, and analysis.

Conceptual Frameworks

Cultural perspectives on childhood are reinforced by sociological conceptions of the purposes and functions of schools in contemporary society. Sociological views of the structure and goals of school emphasize their transitional, preparatory, and sorting function. Schools are considered critical to the maintenance of societal order and stability, and social morality. Through coping with the institutional norms and constraints of school, potentially disruptive and undisciplined children learn to become civilized and orderly citizens. In *Moral Education*, French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1961) proclaimed the school as the primary institution of social cohesion, an intentional setting designed to counteract the disintegration and chaos of modernization and urbanization in late-nineteenth-century society.

> It is by respecting the school rules that the child learns to respect rules in general, that he develops the habit of self-control and self-restraint simply because he should control and restrain himself. It is a first initiation into the austerity of duty. Serious life has now begun. [p. 149]

Fundamental to classical sociological theory is the concept of a normative order. The founders of this tradition—Durkheim, Merton, Parsons, in particular—see society differentiating itself for survival.[2] Differentiation in the form of "specialization" allows individuals to fulfill them-

selves while serving a collective good. A precarious balance exists between individual autonomy and expression and the need for social cohesion and productivity. The tension between "aggregate" (collective) and "distributive" (individualistic) values must be resolved in the direction of maintaining a stable social order if society is to function without major social upheaval.

Without social norms to regulate a cohesive social system, society would regress and disintegrate into chaos. Social discipline sustained by regulatory norms, therefore, is considered necessary, beneficent, and good for individual survival, safety and development. Although the major protagonists of this view see the regulatory mechanisms as benign, many critics see a preoccupation with order, equilibrium, and control that reflects a middle-class bias favoring the status quo. The focus on the regulatory function and power of social norms is vividly expressed by Robert Nisbet (Merton and Nisbet, 1966):

> Modern sociology . . . maintains simply that social behavior, whether moral or immoral, legal or illegal, can be understood only in light of the values that give it meaning and institutions that provide the channels of these values. [p. 4]

Those who apply this theoretical framework to the purposes and functions of schools in our society describe the norms and structures of schools that are designed to ensure societal order and stability. They distinguish, for instance, between the particularistic relationships sustained in families and the universalistic relationships established between teachers and children in schools.[3] Families support egocentric, indulgent, individualized behavior on the child's part, but the school's purpose is to standardize a product, to explicitly differentiate among children on the basis of visible criteria of judgment, and to insist upon behavioral and attitudinal conformity. In school, teachers attend to various segments of the child's person and purposely exclude other dimensions—emphasizing sameness and uniformity among children and discouraging a view of the child that is complex, multifaceted, changing, and potentially disruptive.

The scope and depth of relationships between teachers and children reflects the preparatory function of schools. The roles allocated to children in school are evaluated primarily in terms of their contribution to some *future status* rather than reflecting full membership in the present society. The Parsonian (1959) analysis of the unique characteristics of school life traces the relationship between the teacher's evaluation of achievement and the child's later participation in the occupational and political world.

> The school is the first socializing agent in the child's experience which institutionalizes a differentiation of status on a nonbiological basis. Moreover, this is not an ascribed status; it is a status "earned" by differential performance of tasks set by the teacher. [p. 72]

For Parsons, therefore, the classroom is a relatively impartial and objective social structure which is experienced by the child as being strikingly different from his egocentric, child-centered experience before entering school. The classroom is seen as essentially liberating—a place where children can rid themselves of the shackles of sex, family, culture, and race, and can prove themselves anew as achievers or nonachievers. (This is obviously a theoretical, rather than an empirical, conception of the socialization function of schools—not based on data but on a normative notion of a static, democratic state working smoothly and effectively.)

Following the Parsonian model, Dreeben (1968) sees the classroom as a microcosm of the wider society—a reflection of the norms and values of the corporate world beyond school. He suggests that schooling experiences impart to children the norms necessary to sustain "organic solidarity" in society. Individuals will supposedly achieve a "meaningful" position in the differentiated society that these "democratic" norms ensure. Although the structuralist conceptions of Parsons and Dreeben are useful in describing the natural and inevitable boundaries that are drawn between families and schools and the continuities that exist between the normative order of schools and the social and economic structures of society, the authors give us little insight into the processes of socialization and accommodation that children must experience when they move from one environment to the other. Their analyses do not move us toward an understanding of how children begin to internalize and integrate the norms of the school environment, nor help us interpret deviance or difference in the response patterns among children. There seems to be an implicit assumption that children will be the passive recipients of the school's normative structure, that their socialization will be complete and irreversible, and that the abrupt shift from home to school will be accomplished smoothly.

In Dreeben's characterization, the individual nature of the teacher is also given minimal attention. Teachers, as well as children, are regarded as passive agents of a static and controlling system rather than persons with motivation and reason. They serve as auxiliaries or agents in the transmission of established norms. A teacher not fulfilling his/her part in the process might inhibit vital socialization of society's young, and without sufficient acculturation of norms, children are likely to deviate.

There are grave implications for those children who do not adopt the prescribed norms. William Ryan (1968) reveals the value orientation implicit in this conceptual framework:

> Within such a framework, then, deviation from norms and standards comes to be defined as failed or incomplete socialization—failure to learn the rules or the inability to learn how to keep them. Those with social problems are then viewed as unable or unwilling to adjust to society's standards, which are narrowly conceived by what Mills calls "independent, middle class persons verbally living out Protestant ideas in small town America." [p. 84]

Ryan's criticism underscores the moral tone and ideological themes that pervade the conceptualizations of traditional sociological theory. The focus on social morality and structural dominance, the rigid dichotomies of good and evil, reflect a fear of social disintegration, a wish to rebuild a sense of community and recover the comfortable and intimate relationships of a more simple society. The threat of chaos is centered on children (particularly those who do not conform to the idealized, mainstream mold) who are perceived as unpredictable and uncivilized, and therefore potentially dangerous to a smoothly functioning and orderly society. And schools are viewed as the primary institutions for establishing stability, control, and an early commitment to prescribed values. The structuralists' focus on the norms and structures of schools and their power in shaping and controlling the individual development and collective life of children offers a partial vision and an unrealistic picture of classroom life—one that neglects the dynamic and uneven process of

socialization and the initiating and creative actions of children in the classroom. Negating the presence of children (their difference, their individuality, and their perspectives), supports a one-dimensional, narrow view of the socioeconomic and cultural purposes of school.

Methodological Issues

Finally there are methodological and strategic reasons why the interactions and social systems among children in classrooms have been given such minimal attention by researchers. For several decades, researchers who were interested in recording patterns of affection, support, discrimination, and leadership among children, used sociometric interviews or questionnaires to document their perceptions and feelings. Because of the nature of the research instruments, the data revealed responses that may not have reflected actual behavioral and interactional patterns in the classroom, nor the changing, evolving nature of human relations. Sociometric instruments presented us with a static, unmoving view of the *reported* feelings and views of children at one moment in time. It is likely that these data bore minimal correspondence to the spontaneous, organic, and meaningful relationships that evolve among children in the classroom environment.[4]

Often sociometric instruments were not used for the purposes of description, but became part of adult strategies for *control* in the classroom—that is, if teachers could better understand the views and affections of children, they could structure their classrooms to negate (or correspond to) more "natural" peer patterns. For example, if Susie said she liked Mary the best of all her classmates, Ms. Jones, the teacher, might seat them in opposite corners of the room in order to encourage them to form new relationships and discourage idle chatter and playful behavior between them. Sociometric analyses, therefore, often became tools for adult dominance and control, designed to disrupt the natural social networks developed among children.

There are pragmatic and strategic problems with trying to capture the myriad and complex interactions of children in the classroom. One of the reasons why researchers have followed the behaviors and verbalizations of teachers is because it is far simpler to describe one person's moves than to trace the interactions and communications of many. It is also easier to categorize teacher-behaviors into neat, school-related schema (i.e., procedural, behavioral, or cognitive contents). The substance and form of the children's messages are likely to be more varied, less restricted to appropriate school patterns, with meanings that are more difficult to interpret. The researcher who attempts to record the shifting, fast-moving patterns of interaction among children, therefore, can easily feel overwhelmed by the dizzying movement. In fact, one of the reasons why the research literature seems to focus on teachers and children in more traditional, structured classrooms might be related to the fact that children tend to be quieter, move less, and direct their communications to the teacher. This scene is easier to describe and analyze than the more open, nonstructured learning environments where behaviors are less predictable and clear and where movement is increased enormously.

Although few in number, there are examples of classroom research that have focused on the perspectives and activities of children and observed the differences between children's learning and socialization in traditional and nontraditional classrooms.[5] In exploring the world of children, researchers have not only found it necessary to expand their repertoire of methodologies, but also found it important to rid themselves of the notion of teacher centrality and dominance in the classroom. This new genre of research has documented a highly complex and powerful peer group life that has a profound influence on classroom structure, authority patterns, and modes of interaction.

In *The Lives of Children*, George Dennison (1969), a teacher and therapist, offers piercingly insightful descriptions of great differences in the behaviors of his students inside and outside the constraints of traditional pedagogy and the boundaries of school. Speaking from a strong ideological perspective, but with careful, descriptive detail, Dennison claims that the natural, spontaneous, and creative learning of students is inhibited by the structures and processes of formalized teaching, and that students thrive best in environments that encourage the organic evolution of peer interactions. Teachers, intending to guide, structure, or control, usually distort the social-psychological processes that are intimately tied to intellectual processes among students. Teachers, therefore, must not abdicate their responsibilities as adult figures, but they must also recognize and value the student's individuality, history, culture, and unique perspective on the world. A more "natural authority" emerges as teachers remove themselves from dominant, negotiating roles in the classroom. Although Dennison's observations are systematic and behavioral, his book is not written with the dispassionate and objective voice of a researcher trying to build a strong data base, but with the voice of an activist and advocate trying to enhance the lives of children.

Using more traditional research techniques, and looking through more objective lenses, a few investigators have sought to document the child culture as distinct from teacher-child social structures in classrooms. In a highly original ethnographic study, Stephen Boggs (1972) explored the communication patterns among Hawaiian children in first-grade classrooms. He was interested in understanding the origins of dissonance and mismatch between the communication styles of Anglo teachers and Hawaiian children that led to poor performance of children in school.[6] Using three forms of data collection (observations, recorded conversations with the observer, and performance in reading readiness assignments), Boggs analyzed different patterns of communication according to the circumstance: child interacting with the teacher, the observer, or other children. Children who were expressive, spontaneous, and voluble when interacting with one another, became reticent in the face of individualized, public questions initiated by the teachers, or probing and private questions asked by the observer. However, when

The development of this paper was supported by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education pursuant to a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under Government sponsorship are encouraged to express their judgment in professional matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to the Diversity Task Force of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education, New York, New York, for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinions, however, do not necessarily represent the official view or opinions of either the Diversity Task Force or the National Institute of Education.

children felt secure that adults would be benevolent and receptive, then they felt freer to participate, and even volunteer, in classroom discussions. These great disparities between spontaneous peer group interaction and traditional classroom behavior revealed differences in cultural perspectives between teachers and children on such basic things as authority relations, learning patterns, child-adult roles, and the nature of social groups. Boggs was able to suggest ways in which teachers could adapt their behaviors, pedagogy, and classroom structures to better accommodate to the cultural modes of children.

But even when there are not great differences between the cultural origins of teachers and students, researchers have found behavioral variations in classrooms where teachers assume a more or less dominant role. In *Children's Interactions in Traditional and Nontraditional Classrooms*, Ross, Zimiles, and Gerstein (1976) developed comprehensive observational schema designed to provide qualitative and quantitative data regarding children's verbal and nonverbal behaviors. The investigators' observations focused on the "natural groupings of children in ongoing activities, with or without an adult present" (p. 7), and they found striking differences in the total number of interactions among children that reflected the educational approach of the teacher. Children in the nontraditional classrooms interacted three times as much as children in traditional groups. The greatest number of interactions in the cognitive domain occurred in the nontraditional groups, and these revealed higher-level intellectual processes. In terms of behavior, the results indicated a far greater incidence of disruptive behaviors in the more traditional classrooms which were more restrictive in terms of interactional patterns.[7] What is of great interest is that these data were gathered in contrasting educational settings with contrasting student populations which varied along social class and racial dimensions. For example, lower-class, minority children, who are often thought of as requiring greater structure and control in school, showed higher levels of intellectual functioning and less disruptive behaviors in the more open classroom environments. The research design and methods of this study afforded a view of classroom experience that confronts many of our stereotypic conceptions of children's school behaviors.[8]

These observational and ethnographic descriptions of children in various classroom settings still represent "a drop in the bucket" in a vast sea of educational research, but the new conceptual frameworks and methodological strategies they employ offer promising beginnings toward a more holistic view of classroom life. In exploring the activities and perspectives of children in various classroom settings, researchers have begun to develop innovative and differentiated methodological approaches, but they have also had to develop new visions of their own role as researchers—recognize the lenses through which they view classrooms. The traditional view of observational research, for example, depicts an investigator who enters the field or setting and quickly and quietly fades into the woodwork. This "transparent" observer is supposed to describe the scene without bias, or prejudice, as if he or she were a well-placed camera recording a static and unchanging scene. For those of us who have had experience observing in classrooms, it is clear that our greatest efforts at noninterference and invisibility do not give us a neutral presence. Even if children and teachers quickly accommodate to our intrusion and our piercing gaze, our presence changes the environment and the nature of interactions. More important than the inevitable alterations in the setting and changes in behavioral patterns of teachers and children are the eyes through which researchers record the classroom. Even the most reliable, objective, "low-inference" observation instruments require the selection, interpretation, and judgment of researchers. The interpretations and inferences are guided by the observer's values, biases, perspectives, and fears. Most often, these are not conscious or articulated perceptions; rather, they are part of a deeply internalized world view that usually goes unquestioned and undisturbed.

Misinterpretation and misperception are minimized when the observer shares a world view and perspective that are similar to those of the people whose lives he/she is seeking to capture. Because of similarities in background, style, and values, the observer is less likely to misread behaviors and communications and more likely to understand the subtle interactional nuances that can be perceived only by an "insider." When the social distance between researcher and subject is diminished, the opportunities are greater for increased accuracy in reporting the *subject's* reality. Diminishing social distance does not translate simplistically into matches in culture, race, social class, and sex between researchers and subjects (although I think these matches enhance the possibilities for empathy, adaptation, and alliance). Neither is social distance necessarily decreased if researchers are didactically sensitized to cultural differences and made more conscious of the biases they bring to the field. The efforts at self-consciousness and empathy must be accompanied by data-gathering techniques that are adaptive and responsive to the modes of expression and cultural idiom of the subjects and respondents.[9]

The social distance between investigator and subjects has been a major dilemma in research on classrooms. After all, the sex, age (and often racial background) of the great majority of researchers do not correspond to those of the people they are observing. Most researchers are white males from middle-class, highly educated backgrounds, and they are likely to enter classroom settings where teachers are most often women and where children may come from a range of ethnic, racial, and social-class backgrounds. Descriptions of teachers found in much of the sociological literature, for example, reveal stereotypic perceptions on the part of predominantly male researchers and their inability to identify with or fully comprehend the complex nature of the teacher's role or woman's soul. The images drawn in the literature are often caricatures that are encumbered by cultural views toward women and half-true idealizations of "the teacher" in this society.[10]

Researchers' perceptions of children are likely to suffer an even greater range of distortion than their views of teachers. It is even more difficult for an adult researcher (often male) to reach over the great expanse of age and experience and take the part of "the other" that resides in the child. The uncanny silence and invisibility of children in classroom research is perhaps related to a recognition on the part of researchers that their efforts to break down the social distance and accurately and sensitively record the child's world would be both technically and experientially difficult to attain. But I would guess that the general neglect of children is a less conscious and benign phenomenon—that researchers tend to look over the heads of

children into the eyes of adults. The little people are not only harder to understand and identify with, but small in stature and importance.

It is also highly conceivable that children will have a style and language that is difficult for an adult to decipher and understand. This problem is most obvious with observations of children who actually converse in another language or who use colloquialisms and dialects that are foreign-sounding to the observer. But there are more subtle forms of interpretation and meaning that researchers face merely because they are far from the child's frame of reference and the world has changed enormously since they were children. Views, expectations, gestures, and nuances in behavior mean different things, and the shifts in meaning are swift and unanticipatable.

Children from minority, lower-class backgrounds are likely to suffer the greatest misinterpretation from researchers. The distortions are related to misunderstandings of language and gesture but also to biases of ethnocentrism and racism that are woven into the researchers' perceptions. When the researcher responds to a child's behavior, he/she necessarily perceives this behavior through the filter of preestablished categories. The *same* child behavior may be given a different interpretation depending on who the child is and what he represents to the observer. A black boy racing across the classroom may be seen as aggressive and hyperactive, while a blonde, willowy girl doing the same thing may be seen as gliding across the classroom space in a creative and expressive dance. Similarly, a rough, unkempt, working-class child who says of the Emperor, "He don't have no clothes" may be seen as crude and sexually precocious, while a neat, middle-class child making the comment, "He's nude" may be seen as clever and sophisticated. Over time these behavioral data (often resulting from the observer's naiveté, misunderstandings, or prejudicial judgments) translate into research conclusions about categories of children that confirm cultural myths and stereotypes.

It seems to me that one of the important goals of research should be to provide a corrective to stereotypic visions of the world. In other words, methodological strategies must be developed for reliability, sensitivity, and validity, as well as designed to counteract the inevitable distortions and biases that *all* researchers bring to the field. If social distance between researchers and subjects can be minimized and fears of the strange decreased, then observers' eyes may open wider and see more. The expanded vision of classrooms must include the voices and behaviors of children, differentiated research strategies designed to document a more complex classroom scene, and a greater variety of researchers from different ethnic, racial, and social-class backgrounds. Researchers' views will become less stereotyped and monolithic when people who express a range of cultures, values, experiences, and training begin to become a part of the research process.

Finally, researchers must begin to recognize the deep connections between culture, theory, and methodology. In the process of developing methodological strategies for documenting and analyzing the patterns of interaction and social systems created and sustained by children in classrooms, we must confront the cultural biases and conceptual/theoretical frameworks that have supported our views of children and our perspectives on the nature of childhood, as well as our views of the social and economic purposes of school. These are larger, contextual frameworks that shape our vision of what is important to look at and determine the filters through which we will see the realities of classrooms. Part of the research task, therefore, is to consult and question the cultural and conceptual preoccupations that we bring to the classroom scene. Only then will we begin to gain a more realistic and multifaceted picture of classrooms and a sense of the dynamic and important place of children in classroom life.

Notes

1. This term is used by Ruth Benedict to describe the particular and unique processes of socialization found in different cultures. Benedict asserts: "Although it is a fact of nature that the child becomes a man, the way in which this transition is effected varies from one society to another, and no one of those particular cultural bridges should be regarded as the 'natural' path to maturity" (1938, p. 161).
2. For a good example of the theoretical frameworks presented by these authors, see Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1931); Robert Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957); and Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (1951). The conceptual perspectives of these authors and others presented in this section of the paper are most closely identified with the tradition of sociological inquiry defined as "social systems theory," a perspective that focuses on the power of social norms and institutional structures.
3. For insightful sociological analyses of differences in the structural properties and cultural goals of schools and families, see Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (1932); Gertrude McPherson, *Small Town Teacher* (1972); Robert Dreeben, *On What is Learned in School* (1968); J.W. Getzels, "Socialization and Education: A Note on Discontinuities," *Teachers College Record* 76 (December 1974).
4. For a comprehensive review of the methods and techniques used for sociometric tests and the analysis of sociometric results, see Norman Gronlund, *Sociometry in the Classroom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959).
5. In making the distinction between traditional and nontraditional classrooms, I am not referring to specific organizational structures, curriculum content, or teaching techniques, but rather to the generic classroom forms long associated with the more conventional patterns of organization and instruction and the more progressive, open forms.
6. See also an ethnographic study done by Laura Lein (1975) who describes differences in communication patterns of black American migrant children at home and at school, the speech patterns considered appropriate in each, and the response of the child to each setting. Lein's work is an extension and elaboration of Bogg's research, which related the social constraints of the setting to differences in the communication styles and speech patterns of children.
7. These findings were supported by C. McKeen, et al. (1972) who reported that less disruptive behavior occurred in classrooms with greater peer interaction. In *Teaching and Learning in City Schools*, Eleanor B. Leacock (1969) found that peer interactions out of the range of the teacher's vision were likely to be less disruptive and violent and more receptive and supportive than when the teacher was present. Teacher centrality and dominance may have reinforced competitive, hostile, less-mature behaviors in children.
8. For a comprehensive discussion of the contrasting behaviors and attitudes of children and teachers in traditional and nontraditional classrooms see Patricia Minuchin, et al. (1969).
9. For further discussion of this point, see Montero and Levine (1977).
10. A comprehensive discussion of the teacher stereotypes and prototypes conveyed through the social science literature can be found in my book, *Worlds Apart: Relationships between Families and Schools*, (New York: Basic Books, 1978), Chap. 2.

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